



CULTIVATING RESILIENT OPTIMISM FOR THE HARD TIMES Michelle Gielan

When things are going well, optimism feels easy. But when challenges pile up, that confidence begins to erode. We find ourselves overwhelmed, stressed, and exhausted—unsure how to climb back to solid ground.

You don't need to run a company to know this feeling. Maybe your version is an inbox that keeps refilling, a classroom where one crisis begets ten more, a clinic short-staffed again, a household schedule that looks like air traffic control, a toddler's fever the night before a big presentation, or an aging parent who needs you right when your tank hits empty. We're living in a moment when the volume of problems is louder than the volume of progress. Different life, same physics: swelling demands, shrinking capacity, and a story in your head that starts to tip from *I've got this* to *I don't know how*.

A BROKEN FORMULA FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

My fascination with creating positive change began during my time as a national news anchor at CBS News. There I covered one heartbreaking story after another about problems in our world during the height of the Great Recession. After I left the network to pursue an advanced degree in positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, the central research question I focused on was how to make the brain perform better in the face of problems in order to make positive change easier.

I sought to investigate how to optimize our mindset given how much our brains are constantly being bombarded with negativity. I wanted to understand the kind of information we needed to feed our brains to build resilience and optimism for good.

What I discovered was that we have the formula for creating positive change backward. A pair of studies I conducted with Arianna Huffington—founder of *The Huffington Post* and Thrive Global, that we published in *Harvard Business Review* shine a light on the problem and the path forward. Arianna and I partnered on research to quantify the impact of negative information on mood and brain performance. I had no idea the data would be so astounding. So much so that the results of the second study became part of the impetus to write my new book, *Resilient Optimism*.

In the first study, we split research participants randomly into two groups. One group we exposed to three minutes of negative news. The control group was exposed to three minutes of neutral news. Then we tested both groups on a whole host of psychological and performance metrics. As you might imagine, we found a negative impact on a range of metrics for participants in the negative-news group. That part did not surprise me. What made the results eye-opening was that we tested the impact on mood and performance six to eight hours after exposure to the negative content. Nearly a full workday later—when participants were picking up their kids from school or wrapping up work—they were 27 percent more likely to say they'd had a negative day compared to the neutral group.¹ It is stunning that a mere three minutes of negativity during your morning could result in such a quantifiable change to how you perceive the outcome of your day.

Given this dramatic, lasting impact, we aimed to find out what would happen if we changed the information input—what kind of effect that would have on how the brain responded to challenges and how long the effect would last. In a follow-up study, we exposed half of the research participants to an article detailing a serious problem—in this case, rising food insecurity in major cities. For the other half of the research participants, we appended a short list of potential solutions. Hours later we gave both groups a problem-solving task, and those exposed to solutions exhibited a 20 percent increase in problem-solving abilities.² What this means is that by making a small change to the way we process information, we can change well-being and performance. Specifically, if we get the brain to focus on solutions and what's working in the face of challenges, it makes us better problem-solvers. These two studies encapsulate what's wrong with our current formula for creating positive change.

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Common wisdom suggests that to improve our lives, we must start by focusing on what's broken. That leads us to zero in on problems—at the office, at home, in our relationships—and attempt to fix them from the ground up. This mindset undergirds everything from performance reviews to educational strategies to how we parent. And because it's so deeply ingrained, it's often hard to recognize just how much it hampers our success.

Focusing on what's broken limits the brain's potential. A teacher who only works to bring up low grades without celebrating small gains risks capping student motivation. A marriage counselor who skips over what's working can miss the very foundation on which reconnection is built. A manager who rushes through praise to get to "constructive criticism" may unknowingly derail a high-performing team member.

That's because the brain runs best when fueled by optimism. The human brain is already naturally good at detecting threats—we call it negativity bias. When we focus solely on what's broken, the brain's threat center (the amygdala) lights up, pulling resources away from the problem-solving prefrontal cortex. But when we also engage with what's working, the brain responds with creativity, energy, and greater resilience.

The old formula tells us: focus on what's broken, fix problems, and hope things improve. The new formula—backed by science—shows that resilience grows when we intentionally focus on solutions and what's working.

What this showed me was startling: we don't need more content about problems—we need more intentional design in how we process information. In other words, *we've been taught to chase an emotional response to create change*, as if the right feeling will unlock the right outcome. We try to "think positive," deliver motivational pep talks, or wait until we feel inspired to act—but emotion is fleeting. When the mood dips, progress disappears.

What the research shows is far more sustainable: we don't need an emotional reset—we need a behavioral shift. Instead of simply trying to "feel more optimistic" in the face of problems, we must implement successful work routines that sustain optimism during the droughts. That's what makes challenges fuel for resilience, performance, and well-being.

Resilient optimism is not a personality trait or a mood; it's a trained mindset supported by behavior. That insight became the cornerstone of this framework. I use the term *resilient optimists* to describe people who sustain optimism through intentional, repeatable behavior. Resilient optimists train themselves to see both problems and potential. They seek to understand challenges, but they don't get stuck in them. They stay locked on solutions and draw energy from progress. Most importantly, resilient optimists create a *drumbeat of optimism* by intentionally sourcing and sharing information that fuels well-being and performance.

Before we go further, it's important to clear up a common misunderstanding I often run into: optimism is not blind positivity. Confusing the two can be dangerous. The bane of resilient optimism is irrationality. Optimism, when unbalanced by realism and critical thinking, can morph into blind optimism, which disregards risks, overestimates outcomes, and leaves individuals or organizations unprepared for potential challenges. *Rational* optimism means taking a realistic assessment of the present moment while maintaining a belief that our behavior matters, especially in the face of challenges. Optimists expect good things to happen and expect that the setback is just the start of the story.

Rational optimists never expect life to be free of problems—that's not optimism, it's delusion. In fact, expecting a problem-free life is one of the fastest paths to disappointment. Rational optimism doesn't deny difficulty; it assumes it. What sets rational optimists apart is their belief that, despite setbacks, their actions still matter. They expect challenges, but they also expect that effort, creativity, and connection will help them rise through them. Ironically, a life without challenges wouldn't just be unrealistic—it would be uninteresting. Growth, connection, and meaning often come from what we overcome, not what we avoid. Rational optimism makes room for struggle while keeping our eyes on what's possible.

FROM RATIONAL TO RESILIENT OPTIMISM

If blind optimism leaves us unprepared, resilient optimism equips us to endure and grow. Resilient optimism sustains us in the moments when we question our progress or wonder if we can keep going. A social worker facing burnout might pause to remember the lives already touched. An entrepreneur recovering from a failed funding round might use the moment to refocus. A nurse, mid-shift, might comfort a patient and think, this is why I stay. These aren't grand turnarounds; they're small, intentional choices to draw strength from meaning rather than depletion. The circumstances may not change immediately, but the story we tell ourselves does. That shift is where resilience *begins*.

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That same truth appears in the data: when optimism is practiced intentionally and anchored in behavior, it doesn't just feel good, it strengthens both resilience and performance.

Why does resilient optimism work so reliably—not just in individual cases, but across teams, schools, and even whole districts? It's because we're not just "thinking positive." We're engaging a mindset that is biologically linked to better coping, faster recovery, and higher performance. Resilient optimism doesn't bypass hard things; it equips the brain to stay effective in the middle of them.

For years, research has shown that optimism is associated with better outcomes—promotions, productivity, health, and longevity. Those findings matter because they establish that optimism fuels performance. But resilient optimism asks a deeper question: *What makes those benefits last? Why does one person's optimism fade under pressure while another's grows stronger?*

Here's the simplest way to think about it: when you cultivate optimism through behavior—naming wins, reframing stress, designing for progress—you're not just feeling better. You're laying down durable neural and psychological pathways that protect performance when stress rises. And in our research we weren't just seeing this in individual stories—we were watching it show up in the data, over and over, especially in high-stress environments. That's why resilient optimism is so essential: it's optimism made sustainable.

And while the science explains how this works, many people—including me—have also found meaning in *why* it works. Across faith traditions and philosophical frameworks, there's a shared belief that hope, purpose, and caring for others strengthen us from the inside out. Modern research echoes those ideas: grounding ourselves in something greater—whether that's spiritual faith, deeply held values, or a sense of connection to a larger story—creates stability that helps us weather stress.

And that raised an important question in our research: Can we measure the kind of optimism that actually endures?

WHEN OPTIMISM GOES THE DISTANCE

In 2011, my team and I at the Institute for Applied Positive Research developed the Success Scale—a thirty-question validated assessment measuring three predictors of success: work optimism, positive engagement, and support provision. Since then, we've tested more than twenty-five thousand professionals across industries, collecting data during both "normal" times and the Covid-19 pandemic.

As happiness declined and burnout surged, we reanalyzed the data and found that one predictor consistently stood out: work optimism. People who scored high in work optimism were three times more likely to be highly engaged and five times less likely to burn out. Given that burnout remains at some of the highest rates in modern history, these findings suggest that optimism could serve as a psychological shield—a buffer against depletion.

During the pandemic, I experimented with optimism-building interventions with a group of nurses who reported high burnout. Over several weeks, they practiced small, research-based habits—writing short gratitude lists, sharing daily wins with peers, and reframing stressful moments—to see whether deliberate optimism could shift their experience of burnout. Within weeks, we saw statistically significant declines in their burnout symptoms. The sample size was small, but the anecdotal reports were compelling: when they intentionally practiced resilient optimism, their burnout dropped. Their optimism didn't just help them recover—it made them more resistant to future stress. The same pattern holds beyond health care. Whether the stressor is emotional, professional, or financial, optimism consistently predicts stronger performance and recovery.

This finding aligns with research published in *Current Psychology* showing that optimistic health care professionals can develop greater resilience.³ In that study, health care workers completed assessments of optimism, resilience, and well-being, and the results showed that resilience acted as the bridge—optimism improved well-being largely because it strengthened resilience. Together, these findings suggest something profound: resilient optimism isn't a response to good times—it's a system the brain builds to survive the hard ones.

WHY OPTIMISM COMPOUNDS OVER TIME

The findings in my HBR article, "The Financial Upside of Being an Optimist," build upon what decades of research have shown—that optimism strengthens nearly every dimension of human flourishing. For example, optimism leads to a 40 percent greater chance of promotion over the next year and boosts productivity by 31 percent.⁴ Creativity increases dramatically.⁵ Optimism is linked to better health outcomes, including a greater likelihood of surviving cancer. Optimistic sales professionals outsell their pessimistic counterparts by 56 percent.⁶ Optimistic people live longer, enjoy deeper friendships, and report a better quality of life. Nearly every aspect of performance and well-being benefits from thinking more optimistically.

What we've learned in recent years is that these benefits don't just happen once—they grow stronger the longer optimism is practiced. Some studies reveal what optimism predicts; others show how we can actively increase it through deliberate, repeatable habits. When you connect those two lines of research, the conclusion becomes clear: if optimism can be trained, then consistent practice makes it stronger and more enduring.

That strengthening happens on multiple levels. Psychologically, repeated acts of optimistic thinking rewire the brain. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies have shown that engaging in optimism activates regions like the prefrontal cortex and ventral striatum—areas central to motivation, emotion regulation, and goal pursuit.⁷ Over time, those pathways become more efficient, shifting the brain's default setting from fear and fatigue to possibility and recovery.

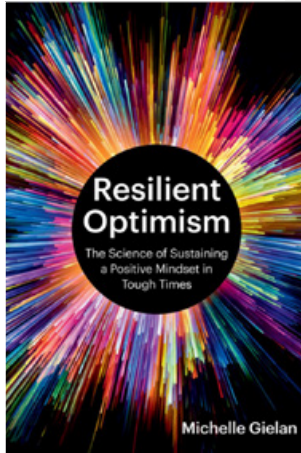
Behaviorally, optimism compounds through action. When people believe their efforts will make a difference, they persist longer, seek creative solutions, and notice progress.⁸ Each small success reinforces that belief, creating an upward spiral of confidence and performance.⁹ Optimism practiced over time becomes a behavioral habit—one that drives momentum even in uncertain conditions.

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And physiologically, optimism builds resilience in the body as well as the mind. Long-term studies show that optimists exhibit lower baseline cortisol, faster cardiovascular recovery from stress, and stronger immune function.¹⁰ Over years, these changes translate into lower allostatic load—the cumulative wear and tear of stress—and longer, healthier lives.¹¹

Once you've nurtured your own optimism, something powerful happens. You begin to recognize when others are struggling to maintain theirs. You see how emotions ripple through teams—how one person's anxiety can stifle creativity, and how one person's optimism can quietly shift the mood of an entire group. The science is clear: emotions are contagious. We don't operate in emotional silos. We broadcast. We absorb. We influence.

In short, optimism practiced once can lift your mood; optimism practiced over time can reprogram your mind, strengthen your body, and sustain your behavior. **That's why resilient optimism is so powerful—it isn't just how we feel in the moment; it's the system we build to carry us through the hard ones.** 📖



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Michelle Gielan is a researcher and keynote speaker on positive psychology. She is the bestselling author of *Broadcasting Happiness: The Science of Igniting and Sustaining Positive Change*. She was an executive producer of *The Happiness Advantage* on PBS and a featured professor in Oprah Winfrey's Happiness course. Gielan formerly served as anchor of the *CBS Morning News*, and her research has received attention from dozens of media outlets, including the *Today* show, the *Washington Post*, *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *New York Times*.

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Endnotes

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